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A PRIVATE HISTORY

I-5/75

by

John Hay

John Hay is a poet who came to maturity during the years of his Army service, though only a handful of the poems in this first collection of his work reflect directly his wartime experience. The quality of verse in *A Private History* is fresh and vivid throughout, the inspiration of a new voice free of convention and free, too, of "modern" obscurantism. Wide-ranging in mood, from the deep reflection of the title poem to the sheer lyric joy of such shorter works as "The Gull," *A Private History* introduces a poet whose future augurs brightly for the future of American poetry.

poems in this book were written during his service both here and in Panama.

John Hay is married and has a very young daughter named Susan. Since his release from the Army, he has been living in Brewster, Massachusetts.

N HAY is the grandson of Hay who was Lincoln's private secretary, and later, under Seward and Theodore Roosevelt, Secretary of State. John the poet, is a graduate of Harvard and a former Washington correspondent for the *Washington News and Courier*. After four and a half years of service during the war, one with the Infantry and the rest with *Yank*, as assistant editor and later as editor of the American edition of the weekly. Several of the

A PRIVATE HISTORY

☆

J O H N H A Y

a private history

D U E L L S L O A N & P E A R C E

N E W Y O R K

☆

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To KRISTI and SUSAN

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A PRIVATE HISTORY

A Private History

"This is my time in the army up to now —

3 years
3 months
20 days
9 hours
6 minutes
3 seconds."

Can we remember, in drifting peace, as he
Remembered, counting his murdered history
Most humbly on the fingers of his hands?
Staff Sergeant Henry Brown, Infantryman,
Who lay on a hospital bed, two years ago,
Beating his sick and clawing dreams away,
By counting, counting his time, and writing down
His only chronicle, his only pain.
They were the soldier's years, ticked off inside
His wounds; and the world lay crippled on his bed.

"I entered the army 2d of April, 1941, was inducted at Fort Dix, N. J. From there I went to Fort Jackson, S. C. I took 13 weeks' training. Then I was sent to Tennessee on maneuvers. We stayed in pup tents in the rain and mud. We started hiking and carrying 60-mm. mortars and machine guns. We hiked 47 miles, a ten-minute break every hour, some made it, some didn't. I went through it all with a 90-mm. mortar on my back. After that we went to Death Valley."

In the beginning, rounding the circle, from fear
To fear. The army's man of dates, the war's
Upholder, learning anonymity,
Starting to run the course of memory,

If memory serves. It serves. It obeys too well,
Stands in line, learns how to eat and sleep, to fall
Upon the ground, to be provident in time
Of death. It bears the soldier's rank and name.

Prepare the sky for battle, letting the rain
Fall down at proper intervals; align
The sun to burn their eyes; regulate the frost
To bind their hands and mouths. An army wastes
No calculations on winds that will not blow;
Nor on the lagging heart. The prophecy
Is made, the event declared, and the soldier's gun
Leans heavily toward the rumbling dawn.

"In Death Valley maneuvers once we staggered to a point where we could see the river. The weather was burning hot. We were so thirsty we beat our way through the swamps and bushes to the water. The rattlesnakes were lying on a rock along the river. The boys just dove in. We carried back water in our helmets. Two drank too much, the heat got them, so I carried one as far as I could. Well, after six months of that place we were about ready for anything."

And they were gathered together in that place
For war, and their mouths spat sand, and the wilderness
Brought them into contempt in their own land.

"We sailed for Ireland in December, 1943. We left Ireland after seven months and went to France in July. My first action was four days later. Our weapons platoon was the first to see action in our company. We had to carry ammo to our first battalion — that was tied down under heavy fire. Walking over your own dead men is something else, through mud up to your knees, also blood from the wounded and killed."

Their bondage to the dead, so long prepared,
Has come upon them — blood for the name of war.
Almighty terror strips them of their youth,

Shrinking the earth to cracks of fire. This wrath
Is not their own. Though ministers to doom,
That howls in the vortex of the brain, and damned
By conquest or despair, they crawl the ground,
Unmanned — with their dying eyes and desperate hands.

"We was fighting around Hill —. We like to get wiped out. My company lost 70 men. I was hit by the wind of an 88 and knocked down. I wasn't hurt bad, just in the arm, but it was bleeding and swollen from the blow. I was carrying a mortar so I had to keep going. Two of our companies was tied down. The gunner and I crawled to the front of the rifle pits — to knock out machine guns that was wiping out our men every time they moved. We pinned them down and our company flanked them. We were in a gate with five men and a Lt., they all got it."

Let us for once be humble, in a respect
For words which speak like men, out of the acts
And pieties of disaster. The soldier, torn
From love, and drinking the wine of graves, has learned
To kill; but stumbles, like his words, toward life,
Being promised in his blood to hold it safe.

"Then we hit Brest after hiking for five days when the Jerries were on the run. In one more battle we had to hold the front for three companies. Then they pulled us out because we had lost so many. We got new men and headed to take another town along the cliff of the ocean. After taking it we got aboard a train and rode four days and now I am fighting in Germany. Rather was, but now I am in a hospital."

Still torn and haunted by their early hell,
Bound to immortal ruin, the soldiers file,
Through night past sleep or waking, on their slow road.
Their war days ended, no stars flash by their heads
To light their strange returning. They drift with pain
On centuries of death, cast off from dawn.

"This is my time in the army up to now —"

Three years, three seconds, time will shrink no more
His side of peace; although he must declare
It and fit it to his soul, line up its bounds
Along his veins until a day commands
Him to be free again. In sickness and pride
He brings those foul, unwaking years, which had
No majesty except in him, the tall,
World's slave, the Hercules whose shoulders fail.
He inherits the earth in ignorance, but fits
His measure to its crime. How can he wait,
This time, for indulgent generals to pin
His glory on his chest, since he has won
The victory no trumpets ever blow,
Being lost with men, like Job beyond his woe?

The Herring-Run

By day and night, out of the law of leaden tides,
Migration and death through the inland gauntlet, where
 the gulls,
Like vultures hunting high air of dying, circle and scream.

The pale blind fish, in millions, move from the ocean walls—
Salt gulfs and dark devouring—to fight the sun,
In the shallow waters crystal to a hunter's eye.

On the stream bed flowing, their sinuous shadows on the
 sand,
They waver backward with the weeds; processional
In tide and stars, pulsed forward by the drums of time.

Soft in the currents, spineless as the water's flow;
And then they leap! Taut daring at the wires, the high
And highest trial; their wounds; their white resplendent
 scales!

The male and female, power and spawn, rocket through
 rage
Of rocks, black storms and flailing torrents on their flesh,
To meet the silent lakes, perfection's morning womb.

They die shining. The splash of moons and golden lust
Of rivers loads the nets, as they protest and praise,
In the last quick leaps and running of their great desire.

Summer's Lease

Hunter and haunted through the lawns.
In the printed garden: pale heliotrope,
Roses and lavender, the hope
Of innocence; and then, black dawns
Of hail. Fine worms in the cradle, nest
Of pythons in a later bed.
How glad I was to hear it said,
That love and innocence know best!

Hunter and haunted. The maple tree,
Green galleon blest with rain, the lord
Of flaming lilies, which were stored
With summer through its sanctity,
Was plundered by the stripping wind.
I listened to the storm beat down
The world, afraid my heart would drown,
Afraid, past comfort, that I had sinned.

Shawls in the attic, a silver brush
And velvet shoes, a gilded frame
For grandpa in his settled fame,
The glint of dust and brass, in the hush
Of finding, under the drumming rain.
We left, but the winter stayed behind,
To wanton with our toys and bind
The walls, and build a hollow pain.

Sunlight and thunder, gold and black;
The robin's song, and the last stray notes
In funerals of fall; green throats
Of springtime, gray voices ebbing back,
Taking our years away. Though I grew
By such progressions, and now remake
Them, hunter and haunted, I cannot stake
My heart on memories so new.

The Town of Fire

I ran, I clapped my hands, and prayed,
Chased silence in a park, and walked
Down alleys in a search for grief.

I watched all strangers' eyes, and stalked
The beggars on their drift of pain,
Hunting for martyrs sprung of flame.

By night there danced a child's disdain,
That gleamed like moths inside a well,
And balanced in a coil of lamps.

I saw by day, as patience fell
On head and hands, how mothers speak
Of habit and avoid the sun.

On every door I saw the meek
Trace shadows, when their chests should break
With fire, eyes with diadems.

I watched them fade like leaves — and make
Light patterns with the air, sedate
And delicate — then drift away.

Until, one morning, near the gate
Of my departure, shadows fled,
And citizens took on the sun.

Each man and child seemed new, and bred
Of jubilance and wrath. My eyes
Were filled with their intrepid day.

When they put off their drab disguise,
I knew what fires fed their veins,
And saw their bodies stand in praise.

A Poem for You

Bold as a crocus that appropriates
The spring, and quiet as a thrush at noon,
You make all seasons bow around my feet,
Till I am fit for nothing but your throne.

I see you tall and swinging down your hills,
Taking possession of the bending trees,
And I must swing, for snow and summer time
Become your palaces and shine your days.

You rule and keep. You ask your subjects in
To see which flower has the brightest need,
To notice that the cat is gay, to watch
The birds arriving that your eyes persuade.

Dear queen, your country eyes show me the rain;
Your fingers, stained with green, make me a gift
Of grass; and I am crossed and crowned with earth,
Sown in the cycles of your endless craft.

A Room of Birds

(For Helen Hay Whitney)

The imperial birds surround her bed; black hood
That graves the raven; entrails and cracks of blood,
Under the talons of the malignant hawk;
The dagger beaks, and the roaring of their wings.
In massive frames they attend her dying, and stalk
As her possession and secret, imperiling
The lilies and the tears; but they are alone,
And wait for a sky and summons not their own.

Her tough brown gods had never let her go,
And now she is theirs, in the tolling silence, the slow
Receding vestures, a bowing out of trees
And all her masks. The masks and lavish crowns
Of selfishness and delight, which begged her eyes,
And the jangling of jewels, which are not so vain
As stars. Her masters have taken her pretense,
And she will have no grave but magnificence.

The young robin she had been, whose gaiety
Surprised the lawns, scratching the frailty
Of leaves, and exploring their shadows for a song,
Had won her emerald spring. And then she tugged
At children to watch their masquerades, and the long
Summers were filled with flowers where she lagged.
Possess, possess until the moon weighs down
In joy, and the day is choked with a green renown.

The riches that settle their foundations on
A bed of grass, the delight in all who win,
And run, and fall to love: "I want, I will keep,
Gathering the great gold elms which blind the sky,
Watching the horses with supple loins escape

The fences that ring my velvet fields. I cry
With my children stiff in antique gowns, and tell
Them of the sparkle in the wizard's well."

But none possess who are waylaid and caught
By summons, though at highest noon, or taught
Uneasy lessons under the garden's grace.
Her brazen masters could turn her mirrors gray —
The gnomes with giant foreheads, who raced
And tumbled in a cave she never saw.
They made her bold, though being bold, she held
Her loves away, with eyes she could not yield.

"I am a woman still, and I cannot learn
A wisdom like an Easter nun, who is born
To coach her meekness and beg for proper bread.
My altars move with mischief; I ignore
What makes me kneel and slows my tongue, for it leads
Me out of boldness to delay, and here
Are my dappled mornings, where the lawns are round,
And the roses grow like stallions in the ground."

The rocks piled in the orchard, where the trees
Turned cracked and gray; winter was full of days
When guests turned travelers, who glided through
Her house — when she grew alone in growing old.
"Bow down and recognize your gods, who do
You malice for all the fears you never told."
But, querulous and vague, she hid their rage,
And her laugh denied the whispers of her age.

The mountainous eagle glares, and the sober owls
Assess the shadows in their feathered cowls.
She made them witness to her gods and kept
Alive — in the forest's green eternity,
Where mold and light of classic leaves are wrapped
In farthest evening, around the depth of trees.
The shields and wings unfold, and she is still,
But left in joy by her imperfect will.

Liars and Clowns

How should we celebrate except with masks,
Of gaiety or lies; since we are men,
And greater liars than the blinded world?

The darkness in my house is meant for me,
For secrecy and sleep. I take no guests
But charlatans, and clowns with painted cheeks.

Defenders, jugglers out of fear, what joy
It is to imitate the sunrise, hang
Its red and clanging baubles on your clothes!

Even the storm — the imager of doom,
Gray soundings of disorder — fits this day.
We deck ourselves with wind and thunderheads.

The evening heaps our colors, green on green,
And yellow from a corner of the sun.
We play its game as though it were our own.

How else to celebrate, until the clown
Is old, the liar sick of lies, and both
Their masks take blackness from the truthful night?

The Gull

The wild white gull comes screaming, billowed and tossed
In the sacred air, over the shore and inland
On the storm. How far and soaring fast it flings
The springing magic of the earth, feathers
Aflame in the cruciform of blood and sky,
And tendons taut with excellence! How high
And blest it wheels in tribute through the wind,
To turn past beauty's shaping to the sea!

The Raveled Road

Until the night trees, flecked with vagrants, prune
Them off, he casts two shadows, one from the moon,
Another from the street lamp by the road.
A thousand miles he walked, until they showed
Him where he stood, clocked to the moon, and traced
By filaments to his desire. He is spaced
Now, his infinity explained, alone
With the sounding angles of the brain and bone.
On his exalted road, abstract from sea
And stars, the void returns his vanity.

He is the dial, coordinate of light
And magnitudes, and yet, one foot toward night,
The shadows break away, dissolve his time
And name. The gargoyle trees dance pantomime,
Mild-mannered birds are gibbering in the grass,
And landscapes of well-remembered fright repass
His mind. The deep, deserted houses appall
Divinity with subterfuge and tall
Dogmatic ghosts. How shall he find his way,
When the moon has other masters to obey?

The road runs east and west; and southward, low hills
Of twisted pine. To the north, the sea, which fills
And spawns the hollow of its world. Slow tide
Of the moon floods pines and sea as shadows slide,
Weaving the manufacture of the dark;
Each for the artifice of waves, or to mark
The currents of the land. With his lost fright
Caught inextricably, now a satellite,
Who once was god, he runs his raveled road,
Apex of shadows, with shadows for his load.

Summer Day

In our lineage of sun and air
We sat accepting; awake by turn
Of clouds, wide open to the sky.
Our bodies' dampness pressed the grass;
The noon light burned our skin; as we plucked
At blueberries, an art of rain
And the working sun. We gathered them
For the hand's creation, for the benefit
Of eyes and mouths — with the day's grace.

For Susan, an Hour Old

My tiny, puzzled child, I wish you well,
And wish your waking to be fair and green.
I ring you blessings from my store of bells,
Bequeath you what my cleanest eyes have seen.
We give our love, that fortified your veins,
With all our trust, joining to guard your sleep;
Where night grows quietly and stars come in
Around your head; and will your pleasures keep
From harm. Like poets, make discoveries;
Walk into dawn and find the crowning sun;
Find love by accident, and see the days
Grow wider in the world you have begun.
But now these wishes feel mortality,
Because your eyes have known the darkest sea.

Lullaby

Now sleep, so that tomorrow dreams
Will follow in your merry head.
Cry if you must, since crying comes
With smiles, but then sleep well and rest
In gentle blessings, for the world
Was made to be your carnival,
Where petals tumble in the streets,
And silver pigeons flock the clouds.
Sweet merriment, now go to sleep.
Your eyes need darkness, soft and fine
As feathers which will fly at dawn.
Goodnight, so helpless and so proud,
Go play with praises while you sleep.

Man of the Sea

Cold and sonorous still, the sea broke out,
And led me from my derelict dismay.
It stood me on the sand, throwing its white
Commandments at my ribs until I sang.

That music I remembered — past my stay
In wars and cardboard towns. The tides were sprung
With song, which followed me until I found
My head was ringing like the strident birds.

I traced the sea's green lip, where sandpipers
Were cutting veins and flowers in the sand.
I heard them flitter off, through walls of spray,
And felt their bones in timbre to the waves.

Where sea grass flicked meridians, I danced.
I tuned my head to armories of shells;
And made a crown of salt and cloth of wind,
To fit myself for sundowns choked with clouds.

But then I ran and took my liberty.
I tore the tide and broke the waves; while terns
Were diving down the sky, in silver shafts,
To fall upon that sounding royalty.

Sunset Hill

It is a long time since we walked this way,
To climb our hill and watch the setting sun.
The woods have turned to conquerors, who play
High tricks with seasons and reshape the earth.

The road is black with barricades, of pine
And spruce, which grew away from us, as tall
As absence and forgetting. Pastures shine
In silver birch that broke their symmetry.

The wind and frost carved up the battlefield,
Still littered by the war with heaps of stone.
The lilacs mount on cellar holes that yield
No more to visitors with ghosts to find.

But then, a little farther, and we rise,
Out of deep wars and summer bondage; free
On those ascendant hills for which our eyes
Were made, now flooded by the amber sun.

A partridge flounders back to forest night;
A golden flicker swings from green to green,
Upon the edge of distance, where the light
Is locking silver with a chanting thrush.

We own this world of sight and air, and dream
Our universe into that mighty weave
Of mountains, lakes, and men; and it would seem
As though we never had to walk away.

But it is time to go, the sun is down,
And we must make our way past battlegrounds
Whose conquerors rebuild their old renown.
For we outlanders have our wars to wage.

The Jester

(For Moyra, Born April 1)

This ancient, inarticulate and wise,
Who chose an April Fool's Day to begin,
Like all new jesters, recreates surprise.
She twirls her rings and makes the daylight spin.
The sky her eyes invent is gay with use,
A tent of flowered poles and ragged stars.
She has a jugglery to introduce
Which can outshine the brightest fairs. It bars
Their famous clowns, denies the quickest hands.
But now the audience is hushed — her smile
Has signaled of her imminent demands —
And tense in wonder at her vernal guile.
They love and praise the tiny jester's face,
Which patterns mortal magic by its grace.

A Week of Rain

There is no question but this rain,
The sister of soft desire, and bride
Of music, married by the wind, has lost
Her pity. The grapes are rotting on the vine,
The glutted flowers died too soon.

She allows no shadows and no stars;
The night sinks under with the day.
No clouds are drifting, the sky curves over us,
Untorn, unseen; as though our eyes had failed.
We are lost unless the sun returns.

Visitation

By dark the booming wind had cupped the sea
And stripped the trees of fancy, cut the town
To bones, and flown its monuments away.

That night the town twice howled the mayor down;
Revised its taxes; sent five men to war;
Agreed that citizens should sin alone.

By dawn the wind was silence, to restore
The dead to idleness, the sick to fright.
It left no walls as pattern for repair.

The day's adoptions used as much of light
As commerce asked. The cats looked satisfied.
And no man noticed that he walked on air.

The Sovereign Child

This child, as new as spring, awake with trees,
But made of greener magic, plays with gold,
As though commissioned by the sun to hold
Its rays: a delegate of ruling seas,

An emissary of the earth. She grows.
The day grows with her, shadows to her feet:
The turning skies and radiant seconds meet
Her least device. Each grace and joying shows

Her head with seasons from the changing air.
And will the nations and their men deny
Her leave to speak, who can be true, or lie,
For all the world? She has no strength to share

With them in plans of war, no armament
For peace. Her head was shaped by night, her brain
Was made by endless chemistries and pain.
She is not sure, nor quite so eloquent

With history. But in her gold desire,
Which covers continents and seas, she makes
Their peace a parody and war a lie. She breaks
Their skill with joy and brings their states to hire.

Penny on the Track

Far dangle of the screaming bells —
We smelt excitement on the rails:
Two criminals at gambler's gate,
With pancake stomachs and no feet —
Then that tall whine, which sucked the air
Into its hollow house and tore
A rack of sunbeams from its hinge,
And stole the wind to disarrange
A flock of starlings on the ties.

Oh, catch the engineer for praise,
One second from that orange throat!
But he was gone. His swaying state
Crashed down, the sky and sunlight cracked,
When miles of thunder came, and broke
In panoplies of plunging steam.
We yelled with fear — we had no time —
We jumped and scrambled in a wave
Of cinders ripping through the leaves.

A coal-black wall smashed down the grooves
Where temporary flowers lay,
Pounding a heavy jubilee.
In God We Trust, the U. S. Mint,
Were sliced into an ornament
To satisfy a gambler's wife.
The wheels had left their epitaph,
Before we turned; to see the grace
Of click-and-loping down the trees.

The Puritans

Darkness, they were aware, is full of rage.
These spare, thin houses, stone walls that welt the fields,
Might prove they were in love with it. They grappled
With the symmetry of God; baring the land
According to His testament, but saving
A private parlor for decorum's sake.
They built a room for Death, their great adviser,
To watch his needs, and keep him at their call.

The night had proof of rectitude, for the moon
And rigid stars kept time above their heads,
Lighting the dial before divinity.
But they heard destruction plotting, in the shadows,
Out of time; behind the dancing summer nights
And peerless snows. And so they trapped the dark
With righteousness, and held it with their pain.
It was a way to trust eternity.

The Realists

At the last suburb of darkness the fireflies
Wink out, the rat-gray fences sink below
The marsh, and the alabaster billboard stands
In giant flatness, reflected in the slow
And sucking tides of oil. The trains are gone,
Their quick screams drifting in the air; the wild
Calliope and candy circuses
Gone with them, leaving the passengers defiled
And lost, at the destination they had dreamed;
With all they saw but nothing as it seemed.

“But this is where we meant to come. We bought
The tickets, we know the landscape very well.”
The billboard letters burn their eyes, as they peer
Like turtles toward the mottled sky, and spell
Relentless power on their heads. All young,
And reasoned men, they had watched reality
Until they knew it as their own, and left
The infirm sun, the old corrupted tree
Of love, for this familiar land; where light
Destroys and leaden tides remold the night.

The World, that Liar

That monstrous liar hides its men. They hate—
It disguises them with paper words and guns.
They love — it buys them houses and marries them
To fear; and, at the last, picks out a date
For their oblivion. The man who runs
Away is a subject for its stratagem.

The Funeral

Love adjusts its new relations, while
A light wind stirs dust above her grave;
And the sun on cemetery hill
Destroys the flowers from the town.
Her friends in Sunday best forgive
Her trespasses, and wander down.

But those she asked to stay have far
To go, with her secrets in their eyes.
They say goodbye, and yet they wear
Her gentle agonies. They will run
Past death to leave her, who prayed
For no more love than meets the sun.

Holiday

The random crowds assemble without tongues
To eat their food, the sun, intern its rage.
Once folded idols, and the struts of flesh,
They lapse like shapeless dolls, and hold their age:
Where size of children tumbling shapes the sand,
And hides the graceless sea from their demand.
All love familiar; all their needs delay
In shouts, and turning of dismembered arms.
They run in admiration, reach for praise,
And breed the color of a crowd's alarms.
Repentantly, they ask the sun's increase,
To bring this day, their cage of sky, release.

The Feather

On a violet balcony, over the crowing town;
From a shadow, hung publicly above the shaded streets;
A child, in yellow like a blur of the fading sun,
Screams high, and smiles to hear his voice, then celebrates
With a feather dropped to his desire. Wantonly
And monkey-wise he puts it to his mouth, puckers
His lips and throws it to the street; but cannot see
It fall — the helpless, dawning prince of the balcony.

Concert in Panama City

On Sunday night the band plays in the square, with pride
And pompous elation; tempting the girls with expectation,
Who smooth their feathers up and down, then walk like
nuns

Before the church. Their lovers, in love with celebration,
Wait wantonly and judge them idly as they pass.

On stage, theatrical as Carmen, the music frees
Abandon, as light as ribbons, bolder than the drums,
As light as the summons of a dance. The actors play:
Brown children, loud and wild; and a smiling drunk, who
comes
In clouds to slide with bugles, and fall on marble floors.

Celebrity and joy for the trumpeter with stores
Of white and gold, that blare and bound from his rounded
hive.

The children take their fingers from their ears, and hide
Like actors from the sound. They twirl and shout; they
contrive
With gravities and test themselves, their feet and hands.

A Street of Whores

Down this rotting street, so listless in its trade,
So hot and staring in its close desire,
Comes the youngest and most loud of all soldiers,
Covered musically with insolence and pride.

Down the street where the dogs stagger with their sores,
And drop in the sun, and the naked children stand
In the doors, with the smell of fish and the leaden shade;
Where the heat shapes men and dogs in poverty.

For you, youngest soldier, with your sympathy
And disrespect, the pantomimes crawl out
At night, to cover the refuse of the sun,
To climb upstairs and thump their pearly guitars.

The painted hidalgo winces in his chair,
And whines with his musical saw. His rouge plays cherub
For a set desire, and under a hat of bells
His eyes are cracked and his graying hair drips down.

In a slick green dress, with giant petulance,
His lady shimmies with the band, protests
Her sex, and shifting like a mammoth seal,
Imitates a dancer with her stunted hands.

But the boldest vanities play no surprise:
The fat splayed marvels on their beds; the crones;
The girls who have business eyes, and those who make
Hieratic gestures in their weariness.

They bow to sadness with which you cannot speak;
And, as strangers with an absent trade, they wait,
Adjust the fetish of a dress, prepare a smile —
For rooms where speech is alone, and flesh no foil.

So swagger down in innocence, between
Their offerings, where music chatters behind
The blinds, and shadows rot the walls. And throw
Your lust and mischief at a street of whores.

The Merchants

The slender boys dig in the sand,
With amulets gleaming on their chests.
They stoop and dip their hands in the sea,
Its shining rivulets between them,
And stoop and search through sand, attacking
Colors in the grain of broken shells.

Watching, consulting, as the tide
Draws back and leaves them on a floor
Of mackerel-purple, they move in markets
Of device, and store their bins with cloth,
And beads of silver; bearing the wealth
Of towns, as the sun recedes and shines.

Herons

The herons, more delicate than foam,
With feathers flicked by the sweet wind,
Divide the sea, on prows of rock,
Sharing their graces where they stand.

In faint defiance at the waves;
The water lushing, green and low;
Their wings bloom lightly, and their legs
Push backward as they fly away.

Above reflection on the sea,
And up between the stippled skies,
White wings of herons curve and beat,
Bearing the body's flame and praise.

Et Portae Inferi Non Praevalebunt

The sunlight rages on a roof of green;
As the shrilling, day-born children race and pant,
Breaking the secrets of a nave of trees,
Running down their liberty, and sprouting age.

Inside the church, high well of silence, bells
Ring off a time of excellence. Loud air
On crowded trees. Softly, with the feet of a child,
An acolyte brings flowers to the walls.

A novice in all things, stranger to awe,
And half afraid to hear the bells break out
Of holiness, the boy takes flowers, and lays
Them on the altar steps, and is led away.

The sun's great fire burns the leaves; and the noise
Of children scatters through the streets; with mouths
Of laughter; in rites of growth, and choirs of praise.
And the gates of hell will not prevail.

And Grow

As patience paints the flower red, so grass
Binds heaven with its cautious love. Slowly
Their roots divide the earth, which draws
Down rain to fill its metrics, and their leaves
Devour jewels before the pauper snow.

What spawns is shaped in war, as spiders spin
Toward death in their becoming. Hollow shells,
And filigree of bones, align the sea,
Where fishes run below the salt-torn ships,
And birds conform to air, with bending wings.

We have the flower's veins, the fish's blood;
We ran like deer before our birth; our rage
Was tempered in the caution of an ant.
In depth of leaves, we will engage the sun,
And grow like birds, from ugliness to wings.

One World

“Hell yes, I’ve seen the world!
Sweated out a year in Panama, got laid
In Paris, near froze to death in Belgium, rode
In the convoy to Kunming, been forced down
In Burma, had a rough deal on Iwo, seen
The fires in Cologne, the Colosseum,
The pyramids of Egypt, turned down a harem
Of twenty-eight women in Borneo: the whole
Damn show. And you can have it!”

Twilight Travelers

The trains take us in an unwilling sleep,
Between our midnights and a foreign dawn;
When the owls switch roosts, from land to land, and the
shape
Of trees is turnabout on the swaying world.

Forever leaving — in a gray well, with ears
That roar in water, like the swimmer who dives
For shells with slowing hands — we hardly dare
To reach for hope which has no custody.

We move to a new country, where the roads
Are split by shadows, where narrow skies are hatched
By rain, and the sun comes back to burn and fade
Our eyes, until we are deceived with night.

The pilot awakes, to stumble toward the sky.
The infantryman keeps off an iron sleep,
With legs that float on imageries of earth,
Playing limpid fictions like a marionette.

In perpetual danger, edged with dreams, the planes
Push through the air, deliberate as whales,
And the walls of ships stand high, as the sea begins
To weave and rock them on its slow command.

We are all twilight travelers, and we move,
At the demand of engines or of war,
To walk new continents, and to drone above
Strange clouds, while our mile and season lag behind.

A Time to Keep Silence

The season lasts on prodigies of youth,
Who hold the strictest hours of their time
For the face of parting, and surprise of love.
They sent their sailors to the growling ships,
Now each vast minute binds a dying face.

Where the world breaks, youth imports its art.
And is the soldier, trademark of his age,
Now slumping only to an outward death?
If they should learn to question, would the cage
Of loss be smashed, the old affections freed?

Their separation holds the streets, while the seed
Of silence grows against the invading dark:
In youthful ignorance as strong as love.
In the living time of night they still embark,
Past myths of light, for unimagined seas.

Banished

He is the anger of the sterile war,
Its avarice and fear, deceived in blood.
But he is less than man, holding his arms
Like warriors, defiant and afraid.

*He has another anger, for his youth,
And sees its golden growing turn uncouth.*

He is the artist of his gallantry,
The courage, and the pestilence, of death;
Professional of pain, and guide to guilt
When lovers will applaud him for his fate.
*“I miss the tide of evening, when the air
Changed with my loving, precious and aware.”*

He is as meek as moths, as strong as stars.
With brothers in his grief, he lost his pride
When guns cracked sky and roared eternity,
Stopping more questions in his head than hate.
*“The image of her curving loins, unused,
Comes up to me — my banishment accused.”*

He learned the tenderness that isolates
The heart, and patience that can kill or die.
He found the hero, and his steady wrath;
But nothing which could praise him as a man.
*“She will come back with peace — her level eyes —
To tell me which is blood, and which are lies.”*

To a "Scientific High Command"

Scar me with atoms and the metal sun.
I can be proof of all anatomies.
The naked monkey, and the headless dog
Are my examples, and the veins of frogs
Collaborate with mine. Let me disclose
The wanton symptoms in my head and bones.
Let them be models for your new campaign.

Oh, I shall be a rare experiment!
For I have catching eyes like gulls in air,
Though, like a hen, I grow near blind at night.
Your instruments will find me in a lair
With moles and bears, from which I rise to plot
My own experiments. I am concerned
Like you with science and the elements.

I want to know what rarities outlast
The sun; what calls the birds from wings to need,
And if their bones enclose the hemispheres.
I want the remedy of moths, that lead
Down halls to softness and a hiding star;
The paradox of crickets, in the grass
That grows as tall as trees around their song.

Still, my experiments should not intrude
On yours; for you will find in me the proof
Of all research, however wild or strict.
I can be used to find the moon, or saved
For war; and from my blood you may predict
The temporizing planets in their tracks.
But tell me first if you know more than I.

The Photograph

Is it her face, faded and beckoning,
This pledge and rarity he keeps from sight? —
A browning dream, out of all reckoning
In the perplexity of distant eyes.

She is his secret, and as dark as tears,
To hide close by his flesh, but disbelieve,
Until he feels his seasons back, and rears
His memories to bring her face alive.

Though pressed from recognition, like the dried
And keepsake flowers, ornaments of dust,
Her colors grow on mystery; they hide
With harvests, and come out behind the sun.

“Two letters and a picture of his wife.”
No war can plunder them, forever lost
In his new silence; though a robber’s knife
Should disenchant them on the trampled field.

'Grace me with Lilies'

Grace me with lilies, smother me
With their pollen, that I may breed in gardens.
Thick flowers in the summer womb
Must build my pardon, since I am sick
From dust and the presumptuous graves.

More helpless than a moth, caught in
The evening heat with loaded wings,
The searchlight plunged me until I lost
The sky, and slid down white and burning
In a wingless plane, to stretch with death.

Grace me with flowers, scatter deep,
Abounding colors on my arms,
That I may be rich, and grow in praise.
For the flaming walls crash near my heart,
And my hide is thin, being pressed by fear.

Dispute for Death

They dramatize the dead, as though the dead
Could paint their flags, or win the right parades;
They weave imaginary graves with print
Of colored stars, and twist the buried mouths.

This man had asked no pensions for his smiles,
And stored no idle flowers in his house.
His children could not feel him when he died,
Since any death grows quick for cheerful men.

Who employs him then, for his peculiar joy?
He cannot save his hands to advertise.
Will he explain his nether attitude?
When could you stop to listen, if he did?

Another tore his tumbled guts with hands
That ran like rabbits in a hedge, and now —
No parlor crepe assists at his demise,
No relatives solicit his consent.

The dead restrict their compass to an inch,
And bring no summer measure to its points.
They will not wait to circle our design,
Or trace the evil figures on our charts.

Landscape After War

Monsters and megaliths will scare a child,
But here the world is turned against his fear.
The eyes see more than seasons, so the cold
Of winter and the dawning spring are less

Than sight. All trees reverse and disappear,
We cut down columns for our fires, and as
A man is brightened by the sun, he wonders
If his house has burned. The lands are mountain high

Or flat as valleys. Stars are ebony.
The moon replates the sky with borrowed light.
Tumescent cities break; their fragments crawl
Across the fields and shake the shadows off

From grass and stone. Their voices turn to words
Which clog the roads like maggots. Ruins play
The tune, and music separates as sand
And sea. The thrush is larger than its song.

We build our own redemptions: ships that cover
Up the waves, and planes that swarm like dragonflies,
But, unlike them, will not be hid by rain.
The landscape multiplies with death. We mark

Each one and mark all single graves away.
The monuments in parks shrink down, and every
Soldier has his own, a sculptured marble stone
To reconcile the glory of his life.

But by that stone we vow to our dominion:
The life in death which rights the trees; the flame
That boils below the earth, and burns our eyes;
The air that is our property and heart.

Let oceans break and leaves be our medallions,
Let man go roaring in his world, and reach
The ceiling of his stars. His head is witness
To infinity, and rivers fill his veins.

Railway Station

Goodbyes and griefs come here to join the world,
Leaving their hideaways apart to meet
In hospitality; and travelers
Have made a land of what their roofs secrete.

A web of parting, in a thread of roads
That lead through porches, graying with the dust
Of talk, and parlors living back with pride,
Waiting for God to sweep away their must;

Through attics asking witness of the time
Their clothes stood up like sundials, making shade
And hours touch and question all their folds;
Through what is old that keeps the young afraid.

And paths through summer pastures, where the birds
Conduct down granite slopes and fields of song
To milk and sun, loud humming in the eaves,
And boys who run to bring their pails along.

The roads go down the shelves, where fruits and jam,
The pale and purple, shine in palaces,
Seeds of the dew and the begetting dawn;
Where flowers die in kitchen chalices.

From shacks and willows, walls and wrestling vines,
Bare foot that stumbles on a stone, and shoe
That creaks on creaking stairs, the roads bring out
The land's design and trace its shadows through.

A silence comes to silence, shape to shape,
And memories that flow in separate veins
Put faces on the fresh or sorrowful;
As tracks lead inward to the waiting trains.

Epitaph for President Roosevelt

He holds us by the terms of spring. Through him the dead
Will lie in grass, in roots of rain that follow on
Across the acrid cities and the bloody sands.

Come out into the streets, where all the children run
In violence and discovery, and share the world.
Stand in the sun beside his grave, and know the land.

Out to Lunch

The poor have favorites for their love, but these
Have poverty and cannot find their beds.
They sleep with mannequins, and plan their day's
Adventure by the clock. At newsday noon
They cross the street, and push their numbered heads
Against the cold. A wind as hard as stone
Turns up their collars, whirls them down the aisles
Of glass until they catapult like tops
Into a thousand doors. Each face details
Its own prepared calamity, and eats
Its food alone. No lower heaven stops
Their eyes, so without fault and without hate.

City Rainbow

“Come on and see the rainbow!”
It swings above each roof
On the shoulders of the day;
And every door and window
Is opened up for proof
Of this latest high display,
Where the advertiser shows
His bill of green and rose.

“Come inside the hoop of gold
And dance!” All down the street
The heads come out to see
A novelty unfold.
Though spectacles may cheat,
They watch in sympathy.
Then, vexed by the lagging rain,
They turn indoors again.

The Bowery

What is it they beseech, these raving dancers,
Who pirouette and fall like rags? The policeman
Drags them through the door; his kindred face distorts
Like murder as drunks rape pity on the edge
Of bars. They sleep in doorways and stretch in lakes
Of shadow on the streets. What dark entombing
Asks these drifters to come back, and lie, lie down?

Drink down this pity sleep, in that rigid light
That razors walls and shines the scarlet shops
Of mandarins, where the elevated's pillars
Turn as rust as earth, standing like crippled legs,
Bloodless and varicose. The peaceless shelter
Will be sought and left in corners left before —
Idle windows, floors of dust where martyrs lie.

“Stand up again.” The summons in their heads
Will nag, like the mothers whom they killed, to tell
Them: “Here is light to see by, another wall
To cover with your hands.” The liars scream
And they stagger upward toward another door,
Betrayed again, as sleep slides underground,
Where catacombs of whispers brush their ears.

Wives of the City

Their years hump up like earth above a mole,
Above the burrowed streets and rotting dark
That hold a city to its fears. They fail
In quiet habitude, waiting for pain
Or anxious days to take their prisons down.
In this all queens had rights as well as they;
But walls are masters, that besiege the sky
And keep the storm away, the overlord
Of air that strips all trinkets from the flesh,
Beats down the clocks, and rips the shadows off;
Till goblins come to mock them in their grief.

But patience, patience. Cars and clocks run on;
The locks are off the doors, and voices come
To mark a change of sky; crossing the street
A mother crys, "Be careful!" and her child
Retreats but has his eyes on other games.
They lean from windows, labor-soaked, their heads
Held down by stone intentions, and the shouts
Of children; saddled with a weight of homes.
Yet buildings flourish on their sleep and doubt,
Windows are candled by their failing dreams,
And streets still roar, but through their sacrifice.
When stars are hid, the city asks their love.

A Kingdoms Vanity

All colors, derelicts, and dancers fly
Above the currents of the grinding tide.
The sea bird's cry is sharp as water, while
The multitudes of night pass through the sky.

Billowing down like paper from the air,
The bird alights, to tremble by the sea.
A scale, it teeters on its needle legs,
And in its balance galaxies will share.

A petal spinning from the glowing vine,
Rings down in symmetry, and scuds on stone,
To roll from walls into the rolling wind,
And air will hold its fugitive design.

Under this ocean sky, while shadows trace
The moon, we join a kingdom's vanity.
With shining feet, all balance in our veins,
We dance away, as dancers take our place.

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